

## Dionysius Bar Ṣalībī's Works in the Mingana Collection of Syriac and Arabic Manuscripts, with special emphasis on his Polemical Treatise 'Against the Muslims'\*

[Obras de Dionisio Bar Ṣalībī en la Colección Minagana de manuscritos siríacos y árabes, con especial énfasis en su tratado polémico 'Contra los musulmanes']

Rifaat EBIED

The University of Sydney  
Rifaat.ebied@sydney.edu.au

**Resumen:** The purpose of this paper is to present a comprehensive survey of these seminal writings which have survived in the Mingana Collection of Syriac Manuscripts, arranged according to the subject matter, together with a brief analysis of their contents as well as a consideration of their value. Special emphasis will be laid on Bar Ṣalībī's *Polemical Treatises*, and in particular his *Treatise Against the Muslims*.

**Abstract:** El propósito de este artículo es presentar un estudio global de estos escritos fundamentales que se han conservado en la Colección Mingana de manuscritos siríacos, dispuestos de acuerdo con la materia del tema, junto con un breve análisis de sus contenidos, además de una consideración sobre el valor de éstos. Hemos dedicado un especial énfasis a los *Tratados polémicos* de Bar Ṣalībī, en particular en su *Tratado contra los musulmanes*.

**Palabras clave:** Bar Ṣalībī. Colección Mingana. Manuscritos. Tratados polémicos.

**Key words:** Bar Ṣalībī. Mingana Collection. Manuscripts. Polemical Treatises.



The rich collection of the Mingana Syriac and Arabic Manuscripts, preserved in the University of Birmingham Library<sup>1</sup>, contains numerous valuable, and in some cases unique, works by Dionysius Bar Ṣalībī, Metropolitan of Amid (d. 1171 AD) in a variety of fields: Homilies, liturgical works, canon law, commentaries on classical and patristic texts, polemical treatises, theological works and biblical commentaries. Many of these works have not been edited, on the whole remaining un-translated as an entirety, and have been so rarely the subject of extended analysis by scholars in general and historians in particular.

The purpose of this paper is to present a comprehensive survey of these seminal writings which have survived in the Mingana Collection of Syriac Manuscripts, arranged according to the subject matter, together with a brief analysis of their contents as well as a consideration of their value. Special emphasis will be laid on Bar Ṣalībī's *Polemical Treatises*, and in particular his *Treatise Against the Muslims*, which is fresh source for assessing the relationships between Christians and Muslims of the Levant in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

The importance of inter-faith dialogue in the contemporary world is undisputed and cannot possibly be overstressed. Nor is it doubted that sound research in, and investigation of, surviving documents from the past, such as those of our author, can dispel misconceptions and stereotypes which have too often contributed to distrust and conflict between the adherents of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Christians, Jews and Muslims have lived together for centuries, sometimes in concord, at other times in conflict. One of the most tense periods for these communities was in the twelfth century, precisely the period of literary activity of our author and

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<sup>1</sup> A. MINGANA, *Catalogue of the Mingana Collection of Manuscripts. Vol. I: Syriac and Garshuni Manuscripts*, Cambridge, 1933. For the life, career and works of Alphonse Mingana, see Samir Khalil SAMIR, *Alphonse Mingana 1878-1937 and his Contribution to early Christian-Muslim Studies*, Selly Oak Colleges, 1990.

following the impact of the Crusades which upset the delicate balance of communities in the Middle East. To date, we only possess a partial knowledge of how adherents of these three global faiths in this medieval period encountered and perceived each other. Similarly, we have little understanding of what actually happened between these groups and particularly the manner of arguments that were employed by either side in their altercations and accusations against one another. This is largely because most of the relevant documents have remained inaccessible and on the whole remaining unedited and not translated.<sup>2</sup>

### The Author of the Works

Bar Ṣalībī was one of the most varied, productive and prolific authors of Syriac literature who played a major role in the final stage of flourishing of the Syriac theological tradition (the Syrian renaissance of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries). He was a distinguished hierarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church who earned the now familiar epithet “the eloquent doctor” and was hailed as the “star of his generation” by Michael the Syrian.

A rehtor, polemist, deacon, bishop and metropolitan, Bar Ṣalībī was born in Melitene (west of the Euphrates) at the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. His baptismal name was Jacob (James), but he is known as Dionysius, the name he assumed when he was elevated to the episcopacy of Mar'ash (Germanicia) in 1154. It was during that year that Mar'ash was attacked by Armenians and Bar Ṣalībī was carried off as a prisoner of war but he escaped on foot to the Monastery of Kalasyur.<sup>3</sup> He was appointed

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Rifaat EBIED, “Prejudice and polarization towards Christians, Jews and Muslims: ‘The Polemical Treatises’ of Dionysius Bar Ṣalībī” in *Christians and Muslims in Dialogue in the Islamic Orient of the Middle Ages*, ed. by Martin TAMCKE, Beirut, 2007, pp. 171f; R. EBIED, “The Syriac Polemical Treatises of Dionysius Bar Salibi, Metropolitan of Amid (D. 1171 AD)”, *Parole de l'Orient* 31 (2006), p. 57.

<sup>3</sup> This event is recorded by Bar Hebraeus in his *Chronography*. Cf. Stephen Desmond RYAN, *Dionysius Bar Salibi's Factual and Spiritual Commentary on Psalms 73-82*, «Cahiers de la Revue Biblique» 57 (Paris, 2004), p. 5.

metropolitan of Amida in 1167, and remained there until his death on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1171.

### The Works

Bar Ṣalībī's works have been considered a very valuable witness to the lost works of earlier authors.<sup>4</sup> They abound with allusions to, and citations from, such sources, some of which are no longer extant. Hence part of the value of his writings is that they distill the Syriac intellectual tradition of the first millennium.<sup>5</sup> To this end, J. Rendel Harris describes these works as "a magazine of early traditions".<sup>6</sup>

Works of Bar Ṣalībī have survived, either completely or partially, in the Mingana Collection in at least 30 (thirty) Syriac and Karshuni manuscripts. These are: Mingana Syriac MSS 4, 54, 71, 89 105, 137, 152, 155, 181, 183, 215, 225, 231, 234, 295, 317, 331, 332, 342, 343, 345, 347, 369, 386, 424, 460, 480, 513, 525, 549. In a number of cases multiple works and/or copies of writings of Bar Ṣalībī have survived in these manuscripts, and to the above list should be added a number of manuscripts which only contain quotations from our author on a variety of subjects.

Works of Bar Ṣalībī which survived in the Mingana Collection of Manuscripts can be divided into seven categories. These are: polemical treatises; biblical commentaries; homilies and liturgical writings; canon law; commentaries on classical and patristic texts; theological works; miscellaneous writings. There follows a brief survey and analysis of these works focusing on his polemical works in general and *Treatise Against the Muslims* in particular.

<sup>4</sup> S. D. RYAN, *Dionysius Bar Salibi's Factual and Spiritual Commentary on Psalms 73-82*, p. xvii

<sup>5</sup> Cf. R. EBIED, "The Syriac Polemical Treatises of Dionysius Bar Salibi, Metropolitan of Amid (D. 1171 AD)", *Parole de l'Orient* 31 (2006), p. 58.

<sup>6</sup> *The Commentaries of Isho'dad of Merv* 5, p. xxxi (quoted by S. D. RYAN, *Dionysius Bar Salibi's Factual and Spiritual Commentary on Psalms 73-82*, p. xvii).



manuscript.<sup>8</sup> The treatise was also the subject of study by Sidney Griffith<sup>9</sup> who notes that the work is “unique among the works of Christian writing in Syriac”<sup>10</sup> He also remarks that it is “unique not only among Syriac dispute texts, but among Christian works on Islam in general from the medieval period”<sup>11</sup>. More recently it was edited by Joseph P. Amar.<sup>12</sup> As Mingana pointed out,<sup>13</sup> Bar Ṣalībī’s aims in citing the Qur’ānic quotations in Syriac are threefold. These can be summarized as follows:

1. To confirm a given Christian doctrine by listing all the Qur’ānic verses dealing with Jesus, Mary, the disciples and the Holy Spirit;
2. To draw attention to certain apparent contradictions of the Qur’ān where he includes all the passages in which he puts side by side the apparently contradictory statements made by the Prophet Muhammad;
3. To present to his readers the story of some Biblical incidents as narrated in it. Under this item are included all the passages dealing with the Patriarchs Abraham, Noah, etc. whose story is often narrated in a different way from that given in the Canonical Books of the Old and New Testaments.

Confirmation of Mingana’s hypothesis and claim regarding the source of these Qur’ānic quotations in Syriac, containing “variant readings at odds

<sup>8</sup> MS Mingana Syr. 89; see A. MINGANA, “An Ancient Syriac Translation of the Kur’an Exhibiting new Verses and Variants”, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 9 (1925), pp. 188-235.

<sup>9</sup> Sidney GRIFFITH, “Dionysius bar Salibi on the Muslims”, in *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984*, «Orientalia Christiana Analecta» 229 (Rome, 1987), pp. 353-365.

<sup>10</sup> S. GRIFFITH, “Dionysius bar Salibi on the Muslims”, in *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984*, p. 361.

<sup>11</sup> S. GRIFFITH, *Syriac Writers on Muslims and the Religious Challenge of Islam*, «Moran Etho» 7 (Kerala: St Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1995), pp.23-24.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph P. Amar, *Dionysius Bar Ṣalībī: A Response to the Arabs*, «CSCO» 614, 615, *Scriptores Syri* 238 (Text), 239 (Translation) (Louvain, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> A. MINGANA, “An Ancient Syriac Translation of the Kur’an”, pp. 188f; cf. R. EBIED, “Prejudice and polarization towards Christians, Jews and Muslims”, in *Christians and Muslims in Dialogue in the Islamic Orient of the Middle Ages*, p. 178.

with the ‘standard’ text of the Qur’ān”<sup>14</sup> will have to await a thorough investigation and scrutiny of the nature of these translations into Syriac.

(b) *Treatise Against the Jews*

Three copies, one of which is incomplete at the end, of this Treatise are extant in the Mingana Collection. These are: Mingana MS 89, fols. 29a-38b (صعقلا ولاه سرب اوهسا لالحاب صعتقا المي وبحر مكلال اوسد وها دحسلا دمحد حط ووتلا  
لاه صعقلا ولاه سرب اوهسا لالحاب (مكترا سمكلا منيه); MS 215, fols. 101b-116a  
صعتقا المي وبحر مكلال اوسد وها دحسلا دمحد حط ووتلا مكترا سمكلا لاه منيه)  
MS 424, fols. 97b-100 (وده حاجلا دحسلا زوحجال دمحد حط ووتلا).

The text of this work, which is divided into eight chapters (*Kephalia*), was reproduced from a single manuscript (Harris Cod. Syr. 83) as Part I by J. de Zwaan in 1906.<sup>15</sup> Part II, the translation, was never published.

(c) *Treatise Against the Nestorians*

[illegible]

The first part of the Treatise is divided into two *memrē*, subdivided into twelve and thirty-nine *kephalia* respectively. The second part of the work consists of questions and answers between Nestorians and Jacobites. The

<sup>14</sup> These remarks were also echoed by Rendel HARRIS in his article, "The new Text of the Kuran", *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 10 (1926), pp. 219f.

<sup>15</sup> J. DE ZWAAN, *The Treatise of Dionysius bar Salibhi against the Jews. Part I: The Syriac Text* (Leiden, 1906).







(a) The Old Testament commentaries:

- <sup>22</sup> See Rifaat EBIED, s.v. ‘Dionysius Bar Salibi’ in *The Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception* (forthcoming), to be published by Walter de Gruyter. For a comprehensive survey of published commentaries of Bar Salībī on books of the Old and New Testaments, see S. D. RYAN, *Dionysius Bar Salibi’s Factual and Spiritual Commentary on Psalms 73-82*, pp. 14-22.



<sup>23</sup> See S. D. RYAN, *Dionysius Bar Salibi's Factual and Spiritual Commentary on Psalms* 73-82, p. 9 [quoting Peter KAWERAU, *Die jakobitische Kirche im Zeitalter der syrischen Renaissance, Idee und Wirklichkeit* (Berlin, 1960), p. 83].

- Mingana MS 286, fols. 1-117b: ... إمامنا المبرور المصنف (The explanation (*Tafsīr*) of the Syrian Orthodox Liturgy;
- Mingana MS 225, fols. 98a-100b: A commentary on the Holy Chrism (مقالة);
- Mingana MS 342, fols. 34a-42a: The explanation of the Sacrament of the Holy Chrism (أول كتاب أوائل أسرارنا من سر القديس) ;
- Mingana MS 215, fols. 1-56a: A collection of Treatises on the resurrection (أول كتاب من أسرارنا) ; on faith and the Holy Cross (كتاب في الإيمان والصليب المقدس) ; on the Holy Chrism (كتاب في سر القديس) ; and on Eucharist (أول كتاب من أسرارنا) .

### III. Canon Law

Bar Šalībī assembled and systematized collections of laws relating to specific topics, e.g. penitential canons on the obligations of bishops and priests, on penitence absolution, on the sins of the laity, etc. Works in this category have survived, in both Syriac and Arabic, in the following manuscripts in the Mingana Collection:

- [illegible]

- Mingana MS 331, fols. 123b-150b: Penitential canons and a treatise on penitence (... مَسَامِلَ وَمَعَالِمَ صَلَاتٍ وَصَلَاةٍ وَأَمْرٌ بِهِ صَحَّفَهُ دِيونِسْيُوسُ بْنُ كَثِيرٍ فِي رَجَبِ ... مِنْ أَوَّلِ قَدِيمِهِ إِلَى الْيَوْمِ) The work is divided into ten kephalia and the canons to the number of 69 are listed in kephalia 8 and 9.
- Mingana MS 345, fols 28-33: A treatise on how to deal with penitents (وَصَلَاةً). وهي: من صلواته لا يصحف إلا في سنة واحدة).
- Mingana MS 345, fols. 35-88 and 89: A treatise containing the penitential canons and a fragment on penitence and absolution (مقالة وجملة ما يتعلق بها من الصلاة والعبادة وأحكامها وما فيها من النجاة والنار).
- Mingana MS 345, fols. 95-105: A Treatise on the obligations of bishops and priests and the canons dealing with them (كتاب أوامير الأساقفة والكهنوت والقوانين التي تتعلق بهم).
- Mingana MS 105, fols. 33a-34a: A short commentary on the Canons of Eusebius (في القواعد الخمسة والعشرين لمسيحية ديارسيفاليس)
- Mingana MS 480, fol. 23a: A short treatise on the number of Eusebian Canons that belong to each Evangelist (أما كل كتاب من الأناجيل فله حصته من القوانين العنصرية وخبرتها).

#### IV. Commentaries on Classical and Patristic Texts

Bar Ṣalībī wrote a commentary on the works of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. A copy of this commentary is preserved in Mingana MS 539, fols. 3b-235b

...ܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܝܪܬܐ ܕܚܘܒܐ ܕܩܕܝܫܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܦܣܕܘܨܝܫܝܘܨ ܕܐܪܥܘܓܝܬܐ  
ܕܒܪ ܫܠܝܒܝ ܕܒܪ ܫܠܝܒܝ ܕܒܪ ܫܠܝܒܝ ܕܒܪ ܫܠܝܒܝ ܕܒܪ ܫܠܝܒܝ ܕܒܪ ܫܠܝܒܝ ...)



collecting and finally cataloguing these seminal manuscripts, some of which contain unique copies of the works of Bar Şalībī.

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